

Teenage Pregnancy and the Unwed Parent A Gospel-Centered Approach

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CURRENT TRENDS

On June 20, 1978, the California State Senate Select Committee on Children and Youth held a fact-finding hearing. Their purpose was to determine what action the Legislature might take to assist young women in making responsible decisions regarding teenage pregnancy, their education, health and child rearing. The committee was "hopeful" that suggestions would emerge that might help reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies.

Some of the facts that warranted such a hearing included:

A. More than 1 million adolescent women have become pregnant each year, resulting in 600,000 babies, or 1/5 of all births in this country.

B. Eight out of ten women who become mothers at age seventeen or younger never finish high school. Four in ten who are under fifteen never go beyond eighth grade.

C. A Baltimore study showed almost 2/3 of teenaged mothers ended up on welfare and 50% were unemployed 5 years after the birth of their first child.

D. Half of teen marriages break up within 5 years. Those marriages resulting from unwanted pregnancies are three times more likely to dissolve.

E. Babies born to mothers in their teens are two to three times more likely to die in their first year than babies born to women in their 20's.

F. Maternal death risk is 60% higher for teens than for women over 20 years of age.

G. Seven in ten adolescent mothers receive no prenatal care in the first three months of pregnancy and almost one-fourth get none at all.¹

Additional testimony taken from a report by Urban and Rural Systems Associates revealed that only 10% of the teenage students studied had not experienced their first sexual intercourse by the age of eighteen. Serious psychological and physical consequences of unwanted pregnancies exist for both the teenaged mother and child, for example:

1. The incidence of child abuse crimes against unwanted children is higher than in the rest of the population.

2. The mortality rates for mothers under 20 are 30 percent higher than for those in the next higher age group (20-24).

3. Toxemia deaths for teenage mothers are 50 percent higher.

4. Ratios of fetal deaths late in pregnancy are 15 percent higher among women under 20 than among women 20-24.

5. A 30 percent higher risk of infant mortality exists among children born to a teenage mother than those born to mothers 20-24 years old.

6. Children born to mothers aged 15 to 19 are 36 percent more likely to be premature (as measured by birth weight) and the risk is even greater for mothers under 15 years of age.

7. Teenage mothers have a suicide rate many times higher than the general population.

8. Pregnancy is reputedly the number one cause for dropping out of school among females.

9. Adolescent mothers contribute to increased welfare dependency.²

These findings and reports are particularly serious when we examine the number of lives involved. Last year in California alone there were 50,000 live births to single teenage mothers between the age of 15 and 19. Over 19% of these young women elected to keep and raise their children as single parents. Very few have had any experience with adult parental roles and responsibilities prior to the birth of their child. Consequently, the vast majority become dependent on State and Federal Welfare programs. Most find it very difficult to compete with other girls their age in education and in the job market while attempting to be a full-time mother, housekeeper, prospective wife and teenager.

A pamphlet available through the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare indicates the following:

The rate of out-of-wedlock births to girls 14 to 17 years of age has increased 75% since 1961.

Because of the health risks and poverty conditions likely to be encountered, the child of a teenage mother enters the world at a distinct disadvantage. These handicaps are compounded by the fact that very young mothers may be ambivalent about child care and be under varying degrees of psychological strain. They may not have had the experience necessary to ensure maximum intellectual and emotional growth of the infant.³

A recent personal client survey of LDS unwed mothers revealed the following possible trends one to two years after the birth of their child:

	Married	Temple Marriage	Attending Church Monthly
Mothers who kept their children	30%	0%	55%
Mothers who relinquished	60%	22%	88%

The women surveyed were all clients of LDS Social Services, Fremont, California office. This sample represents approximately one half of the total number served from September 1976 through September 1977. Ages ranged from 16 through 21 with the average age being 18. This survey was taken by telephone Sept. 19, 1978.

In summary, one out of every ten teenage girls in American today will become pregnant this year representing some 600,000 births. These teenage pregnancies have become a serious social, economic, health and spiritual challenge effecting our generation as well as the next.

HELPFUL COUNSELING MATERIAL FOR THE LDS UNWED PARENT

In my opinion adoption is often an appropriate alternative to unwed mothers who rightfully reject abortion and are unable or unwilling to marry the putative father. Yet for many LDS unwed mothers and their families, adoption may not be considered, initially at least, as an appropriate or acceptable alternative. The following quotes and stories have been found helpful in working with unwed mothers who are, or may, consider adoption as well as for those who are planning for adoption:

"Often the question is asked what should unmarried parents do then. One of the most important things they should do is seek help from the parents and their bishop. Loving parents and an understanding bishop can help them as they begin the vital process of repentance. They can then help the young unwed parents make eternal decisions. Whenever possible, unwed parents should marry and build a home. When this is not possible, adoption through LDS Social Services is preferred so that the infant can be sealed to living, eager parents in an eternal family. A baby needs a family - a father and a mother. The Lord intends for babies to have a family, and for families to be eternal. When the young man and woman created life by sinful behavior the very least they can do to begin their personal atonement is to preserve the life

of the child, whether or not they place the infant with adoptive parents."⁴

"A child has three fundamental rights - a respected name, a sense of security and opportunities for development."⁵

"Unwed mothers need to seek counsel from their bishops so they repent and correct their lives. In general, the wisest choices for both the parents and the child seem to be in this order:

"1. Marriage in accordance to the gospel plan.

"2. Releasing the child for adoption into an LDS family who will insure his or her complete growth and development."⁶

The Second Estate: A fictitious story about a spirit child being prepared by her Heavenly Father for future earth life: "Now their joy shall be full for you are what mortals call 'adopted' by this family . . . they have talked to me often and made many promises if they might be given a child to raise and you have been chosen as an answer to their prayers. . . ."⁷

I Want To Keep My Baby: Paperback story and 16mm film of a young teenage mother who keeps her baby and after approximately a year places her baby for adoption. The story depicts some realistic obstacles and pressures associated with being a single teenage parent in today's society.⁸

Don't Think It Could Never Happen To You. True story of an LDS unwed mother who places her child for adoption. "I always pictured the girl who gets pregnant as a pathetic individual--someone from a poor family, whose parents didn't care. . . . But I would never have pictured the unwed mother coming from a strong Mormon family with parents who love her and have given her the best possible training. . . ."⁹

ENCOURAGING SELF-RELIANCE WHEN COUNSELING UNWED MOTHERS

A mother's decision to relinquish her baby is a very difficult one, for many social pressures operate against it. Very often friends and relatives are generous in offering help in the form of clothes, babysitting services, and the like, thus making it possible for the woman to keep the baby. Society in general exerts a subtle influence in that it obliges people to be responsible and pay for their mistakes. In addition, pregnant teenagers, caught in the throes of their dependence/independence struggle, often elect to keep their babies, thereby asserting they "can manage on their own."¹⁰

As LDS counselors, I believe we need to be cautious in our provision of services to unwed mothers during and directly after their pregnancies. If we provide services and

satisfy needs that can and should be met by the unwed mother herself we may do her an injustice in the long run. The principles of welfare which are the essence of the gospel have application to working with unwed parents. "If a member is unable to sustain himself, then he is to call upon his own family, and then upon the Church, in that order, and not upon the government at all."¹¹

These same welfare principles have like application to emotional and spiritual needs, in addition to temporal needs. Many of the alarming statistics mentioned earlier are a result of the inability of young unwed mothers to cope with the realities of being an independent adult in society. Some made the choice to be a single parent at a time when many of these same parental roles and responsibilities were being provided for her by others. Now, sometimes years later, she finds herself in the real world, unable or unwilling to deal with the realities and restrictions of being a single parent. I believe that we can help an unwed mother avoid some of these later hardships and discouragements by encouraging her, if she has decided to keep her baby, to begin assuming now, to the fullest extent possible, the ultimate future roles and responsibilities she will face as a single parent. I encourage this with each unwed parent I counsel for two specific reasons, which I share with her: (1) If she does indeed keep and raise her child as a single parent, she will be better prepared to care for the child if she has utilized this time productively. Arrangements for housing, schooling, babysitting, employment, etc. can often be made prior to the baby's arrival. (2) On the other hand, as the unwed mother begins to assume these adult roles and responsibilities in a reality context, she may discover for herself that she is not ready, willing, or able to do so at this point in her life. The goal in this reality approach is to allow the unwed mother the opportunity to make this discovery prior to the birth of her child. If she makes this discovery prior to the birth of her baby, the possibility of adoption is much more likely.

It has been my experience that unwed parents appreciate being treated honestly and openly, with emphasis on allowing them to be responsible for their decisions. A recent unwed mother commented after her interview, "We talked about the choices I had. I could keep my baby, or I could go through the agency and have him adopted. Either way, my counselor was prepared to help and advise me. Most of all, he was ready to respect my decision. Never once did he tell me what to do, but always let me make my own decisions." An additional advantage to this reality-based approach is that it frees the counselor from the tendency of getting hooked into endless discussions of pros and cons of keeping or placing her baby. These discussions are especially difficult when the counselor is attempting to explain how difficult it will be for

her as a single parent in the "real world" while she is currently living in an "artificial world" where others are assuming for her such responsibilities as housing, finances, transportation, baby care, etc. Perhaps the greatest benefit in allowing unwed mothers to make decisions based on their own personal experiences is in regards to the strength of those convictions at the time of relinquishment. The chances of the mother feeling coerced by others now or later are lessened greatly when she has been the prime mover in her own decision-making process, and feels her decision was based on her own experiences. Elder Boyd K. Packer recently stated at the Welfare session of General Conference, "We have become very anxious over the amount of counseling that we seem to need in the Church. Our members are becoming dependent. We must not set up a network of counseling services without at the same time emphasizing the principles of self-reliance and individual independence. If we lose our emotional and spiritual independence, our self-reliance, we can be weakened quite as much, perhaps even more, than when we become dependent materially."¹²

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